

MARY ROBINSON

Mary Robinson, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself. With Some Posthumous Pieces*, 4 vols (London: R. Phillips, 1801), vols I–II.

Since its first publication in 1801, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson* has gone through many editions and perpetuated her fame as an actress, author and royal mistress. The original four-volume work, edited by her daughter, Maria Elizabeth, included Robinson's own autobiographical narrative and a continuation of that narrative by 'a friend' (Volumes I and II), as well as a collection of previously published newspaper editorials, some 'posthumous pieces' and numerous tributes to Robinson written by her contemporaries (Volumes III and IV). In 1803, the original publisher, Richard Phillips, brought out a truncated version of the *Memoirs* and established an authoritative precedent for later editions that include only the first two volumes recounting the fascinating story of Robinson's life.

By general consensus, the most intriguing part of that story begins on the legendary evening of 3 December 1779, when Robinson played the role of Perdita in a command performance of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and dazzled the seventeen-year-old Prince of Wales (later George IV). A few days after the performance, the Prince expressed his passion, and his own dramatic propensities, by initiating an 'epistolary intercourse' in which he played Florizel to Robinson's Perdita. After receiving repeated assurances of his unwavering affection and a written promise of twenty thousand pounds when he came of age, Robinson retired from the stage at the Prince's request and assumed a new role as his mistress. The off-stage romance ended unhappily approximately one year after it began, exciting much speculation about whether Robinson would publish the letters of her inconstant 'Florizel' or return them, for a price, to the embarrassed royal family.

In newspaper coverage of their notorious liaison, 'Florizel' and 'Perdita' became ubiquitous code names for the Prince of Wales and Robinson, but their nominal identification with the young hero and heroine of Shakespeare's romance ultimately did less to confirm the parallels between art and life than to expose

the underlying disparities. As newspaper gossip repeatedly emphasized, 'Perdita' Robinson was not the innocent lost daughter of a royal duke, but an experienced and irrecoverably lost woman, with a husband, a child and a dubious reputation as an actress. The narrative compulsion to expose Robinson grew more intense after she lost the 'protection' of the Prince and entered into a series of affairs with other men, including his close friend Lord Malden, the Whig statesman Charles James Fox and the Revolutionary War hero Banastre Tarleton. The most slanderous accounts of Robinson appeared in the anonymously published *Memoirs of Perdita* (1784), which figured her, in a variety of compromising positions, as a promiscuous and opportunistic woman of the town.

Like a number of actresses and other women of dubious reputation before her, Robinson turned to the genre of autobiography for the express purpose of self-vindication. Although she is much more circumspect than the so-called 'scandalous memoirists' of the earlier eighteenth century, Robinson nevertheless writes very much within the same tradition when she represents herself as a victim of calumny and punctuates her narrative with disclaimers and protests of innocence.¹ Her overriding motive emerges most clearly when she writes, 'Indeed the world has mistaken the character of my mind; I have ever been the reverse of volatile and dissipated; I mean not to write my own eulogy; though, with the candid and sensitive mind, I shall I trust succeed in my vindication' (this volume, pp. 90–1). Maria Elizabeth foregrounds this motive for writing when she introduces the *Memoirs* with an explicit statement of her interest in the 'vindication of a being ... whose real character was little known' (this volume, p. 10). Robinson's own narrative, as well as that of the unidentified 'friend', probably Maria Elizabeth, seeks to replace a two-dimensional public image with a three-dimensional character possessing thoughts and feelings. As they reveal the interior spaces of Robinson's mind and heart, both narratives also plead extenuating circumstances and ask 'candid' readers not to judge Robinson by some rigid standard without first considering how they themselves would have acted in her place.

While Robinson's critics often attributed her errors to a 'spirit of levity' and a 'strong propensity to dissipation',² Robinson herself maintains that her life was 'marked by the progressive evils of a too acute sensibility' (this volume, p. 24).³ For Robinson, sensibility is not simply an excess of emotion, but a peculiar susceptibility to impressions of beauty and grandeur, which invoke her desire to respond and to become a participant in the aesthetic experience. Robinson's first example of this artistic sensitivity comes as she recalls the 'sensations' that she experienced as a young child listening to the organ and choristers in St Augustine's Cathedral in Bristol and the 'longing' that she felt to 'unite [her] feeble voice to the full anthem' (this volume, pp. 24–5). As a teenager, Robinson became particularly susceptible to the calling of 'drama, the delightful drama, [which] seemed the very criterion of all human happiness' (this volume, p. 66). In

Robinson's narrative, drama is the 'true love' that her parents refuse to sanction, and the stage is a romantic alternative to marriage. At the very moment that she spoke her marriage vows, Robinson recalls, her 'fancy involuntarily wandered to that scene where [she] had hoped to support [herself] with *eclat* and reputation' (this volume, p. 81). After describing a painful confrontation with her husband's mistress and a card party where she met the 'bewitching' actress Mrs Abingdon, Robinson confides, 'My imagination again wandered to the stage, and I thought the heroine of the scenic art was of all human creatures the most to be envied' (this volume, p. 129). This idealized image of the actress is strikingly similar to the image of the poet that Robinson conceived after reading the works of Miss Aikin (later Mrs Barbauld): 'I thought them the most beautiful Poems I had ever seen, and considered the woman who could invent such poetry, as the most to be envied of human creatures' (this volume, p. 114).

The sensibility that arouses Robinson's professional aspirations to be an actress and a poet carries over into her personal life, where she seems to be particularly susceptible to the influences of men who appeal to her imagination as embodiments of a masculine ideal – the Prince, the Statesman, the Warrior Hero. Although Robinson's detractors presented her affairs with such men as evidence of her propensity to dissipation, her own narrative suggests that she strayed from the path of 'virtue' because her husband failed to satisfy her longing for a soul-mate. As she explicitly states at one point, 'Unquestionably the Creator formed me with a strong propensity to adore the sublime and beautiful of his works! But it has never been my lot to meet with an associating mind, a congenial spirit, who could (as it were abstracted from the world,) find an universe in the sacred intercourse of soul, the sublime union of sensibility' (this volume, p. 154). Robinson clearly implies what she was always searching for in her open acknowledgment of what she never found. The person who came closest to fulfilling Robinson's ideal of a 'congenial spirit' was perhaps her daughter, Maria Elizabeth.

For more than two hundred years, Robinson's *Memoirs* has met with a largely sympathetic audience, though few readers find her entirely blameless or truthful. The *Monthly Review* set the tone for much later commentary when it observed, 'The beautiful, ingenious, and unfortunate Mrs. Mary Robinson has thrown over the present account of herself all the air of a novel'. Although it took occasion to point a moral about the 'sorrows which attend indiscreet and unprotected beauty', the *Monthly* conceded that Robinson was probably 'more sinned against than sinning', at least in 'her matrimonial connection'.⁴ Subsequent editions and evaluations often elide the vindication of her character with the legend of her beauty, captured in famous portraits by Thomas Gainsborough, George Romney and Sir Joshua Reynolds. In Mary Craven's *Famous Beauties of Two Reigns* (1906), for example, a condensed version of Robinson's narrative is introduced with the sentimental assertion that 'her memory is romantically sweet as the

perfume of forgotten rose-leaves ... Art owes her the inspiration given by her beautiful face to great artists, and for this she merits artistic recognition. As for her faults, she has passed to a higher judgment than ours.⁵

The reception history of Robinson's *Memoirs* started to take a dramatically different turn in the 1990s as the recovery of her poetry, fiction and other writing called attention to her merits as an important artist in her own right. No longer enshrined within the literary cabinets of Belles and Beauties, Robinson is now widely recognized, on the authority of her own word, as an 'avowed disciple' of Mary Wollstonecraft. This, perhaps, is the vindication that Robinson most desired. It is probably no coincidence that she started to write her *Memoirs* in January 1798, the same month that William Godwin published *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.⁶ Somewhat paradoxically, however, the recent critical interest in Robinson as an author and an actress has raised serious questions about whether her 'real character' ever can be known.

In Judith Pascoe's influential analysis, for example, the 'real' Mary Robinson of the 1790s was a 'cultural chameleon, adopting every literary fashion' and a whole repertoire of theatrical 'pseudonymous identities'.⁷ While Pascoe argues that these multiple identities 'evoked a heterodox and fluid notion of the self', Anne Mellor goes a step further with the provocative assertion that 'Mary Robinson introduced to her time the possibility that a knowable self ... does not exist'.⁸

Notes

1. Lynda M. Thompson offers a useful overview of the tradition, as well some particular observations on Robinson's place within it, in *The 'Scandalous Memoirists': Constantia Phillips, Laetitia Pilkington and the Shame of 'Publick Fame'* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000).
2. These typical comments on Robinson's character appeared in an erroneous report of her death in Paris, published by the *Morning Post* on 14 July 1786.
3. Kristina Straub calls attention to a similar mode of self-representation in *An Apology for the Life of George Anne Bellamy, Late of Covent-Garden Theatre. Written by Herself* (London, 1785). As Straub notes, however, 'the image of the beautiful feminine victim is undercut not only by the fact that Bellamy is, at least within the "fiction" of the autobiography, the author of that image, but by evidence of her will to control how she is seen ... Her pleasure in, and insistence on, being in control of her own image is difficult to square with the sentimental heroine whose happiness lies in the artlessness and invisibility of convent life' (*Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 120). Although Robinson is more successful than Bellamy, her *Memoirs* clearly indicate that she, too, takes considerable pleasure in being seen.
4. Review of *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson*, by Mary Robinson, *Monthly Review*, 36 (December 1801), pp. 344–50.

5. Mary Craven, *Famous Beauties of Two Reigns* (London: E. Nash, 1906), p. 232.
6. Robinson presumably started to write her *Memoirs* on 14 January 1798, the date inscribed at the top of the first page of an autograph manuscript, now in a private collection. Three days earlier, the *Morning Herald* had published an advertisement for Godwin's *Memoirs* of Mary Wollstonecraft. A tantalizing entry in Godwin's diary for 21 January 1798 indicates that he received a call from Robinson (or her daughter) that day, prompted perhaps by her reading of the *Memoirs*. The call seems noteworthy because Robinson's frequent social intercourse with Godwin ended shortly after his marriage to Wollstonecraft, probably at her request, and it apparently did not resume until February 1799.
7. Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry and Spectatorship* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 1–3. The notion of the autobiographical 'I' as 'performative' has gained widespread currency through the work of theorists like Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. In their editorial introduction to *Interfaces*, for example, they argue, 'autobiographical telling is performative; it enacts the "self" that it claims has given rise to an "I". And that "I" is neither unified nor stable – it is fragmented, provisional, multiple, in process' (*Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 9). Thomas Postlewait represents a less radical position when he observes that 'the character [represented in theatrical autobiography], even though a version of the writer, is a created identity, a representative figure of the author's idea of self' ('Autobiography and Theatre History', in Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie (eds), *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), pp. 248–72; p. 255).
8. Anne K. Mellor, 'Mary Robinson and the Scripts of Female Sexuality', in Patrick Coleman, Jayne Lewis and Jill Kowalik (eds), *Representations of the Self from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 230–59; pp. 253–4.